

VZCZCXRO4497
PP RUEHTRO
DE RUEHVI #1663/01 3181315
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 131315Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY VIENNA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1353
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY TUNIS
AMEMBASSY BAMAKO
AMEMBASSY RABAT
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENNA 001663

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/13/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [AU](#)
SUBJECT: GOA DENIES RANSOM PAID FOR HOSTAGE RELEASE

VIENNA 00001663 001.2 OF 002

Classified by: DCM Scott F. Kilner for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Summary: Top GOA officials have denied media speculation that Austria had paid up to 5 million euros for the release of two hostages held by an al Qaeda affiliate in Mali since February 2008. According to some reports, a charity fund run by a son of Libyan leader Gaddafi paid the ransom. FM Plassnik averred that the release of the two Austrian tourists was exclusively the result of "persistent diplomacy" and praised Malian President Toumani Toure for his role in obtaining the release of the hostages. Austrian opposition parties FPÖ and BZÖ plan to query the FM on the details of the hostage affair in parliament. End Summary.

Hostages Taken in February

¶2. (U) The two Austrian tourists, Andrea Kloiber (43) and Wolfgang Ebner (51), were kidnapped in southern Tunisia in February 2008 while driving in the Sahara. Their kidnappers, who identified themselves as "al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," later transferred them to an area believed to be in northeastern Mali. The group demanded the release of Islamic extremists imprisoned in Algeria and Tunisia, and the withdrawal of Austrian military personnel from Afghanistan. (Note: There are only four Austrian military staff officers in Afghanistan. End Note). Austria later placed a government negotiator and military intelligence officers in Bamako and reportedly worked extensively through multiple diplomatic channels to secure the release of the two tourists. A source in the Malian security forces reportedly said on November 1 that Ebner and Kloiber were released in a region that borders Mauritania and Algeria. Ebner and Kloiber arrived in Vienna November 1 in relatively good health. Meanwhile, they have provided limited insights into their 252-day ordeal.

Ransom Rumors

¶3. (U) While the exact circumstances of their release remain unclear, rumors have circulated in the Austrian press that Austria paid -- directly or indirectly -- millions of euros in ransom and/or made certain commitments to provide funds. Tellingly, Austrian media in early November picked up speculation by the Algerian daily "Liberte" that Libyan strongman Gaddafi had paid between 3 million and 5 million euros to Islamic extremists connected to the kidnappers through a charity called the Gaddafi Foundation. (Note: The same organization is believed to have been involved in the freeing of German and Austrian hostages kidnapped in the

Sahara in 2003. End Note). Liberte alleged that Gaddafi had acted after the late Austrian right wing politician Joerg Haider urged Gaddafi's son Seif el-Islam al-Gaddafi, a long-time friend of Haider, to ask the Libyan leader to help free the hostages.

¶4. (U) Feeding on such speculation, the Austrian daily "Der Standard" quoted an unnamed Austrian military official close to the negotiations as saying, "I know that a ransom was paid. However, the sum was lower than some are saying. They (the kidnappers) got a lot less than what they wanted." The source further insinuated that Austria had committed to provide funds for humanitarian and infrastructure projects in the area, which would be paid out through development aid channels.

FM Calls Rumors "Half-Truths"

¶5. (U) In reaction to escalating rumors, FM Plassnik, together with Defense Minister Darabos and Interior Minister Fekter, dismissed those reports as "half-truths" and underlined that Austria had not paid any ransom. The release of the two hostages was the result of "firmness, persistence and diplomacy...as well as Austria's excellent standing in Africa," Plassnik told reporters. Plassnik specifically praised Malian President Toumani Toure for his role in freeing the Austrians. Toure asserted on November 1 that his country had not received any money or made any financial transaction in order to free the hostages. According to Toure, the release was due to the efforts of the Malian secret service and local elders who served as mediators. "I want to say clearly that Mali did not receive any money for some kind of financial transaction" related to the kidnapping, he said.

¶6. (U) Meanwhile, Kloiber and Ebner have begun divulging some details of their captivity to the public. In a TV interview November 5, Ebner said he believed he and Kloiber survived thanks to their Austrian nationality, as their kidnappers

VIENNA 00001663 002 OF 002

made it clear they would have "killed immediately" any "Jews, Americans, Brits, Frenchmen, or Danes." They said their abductors at times numbered up to 60.

Comment: Affair Could Influence FM's Future

¶7. (C) It is difficult to judge the credibility of the ransom rumors. Clearly, the MFA's tight-lipped approach to the matter has not served to dispel such speculation. The opposition FPÖ and BZÖ remain skeptical and have announced their intention to query the FM in an upcoming parliamentary session. One of FM Plassnik's harshest critics, the tabloid "Kronenzeitung" has repeatedly faulted Plassnik in recent months for lack of progress in the hostage crisis, urging her to work through the EU rather than alone. Public perceptions of her role in the crisis could affect her chances of continuing as FM in the new government currently being formed.

Comment (cont.): A Searing Experience for MFA

¶8. (C) Regardless of the impact on Plassnik's future, this hostage episode has clearly had a searing impact on senior levels of the Austrian MFA. At the end of an already long, late afternoon meeting on another subject with the Ambassador and DCM recently, MFA Secretary General Kyrle unburdened himself for another 30 minutes. Kyrle emotionally described having chaired 144 sessions of the GOA's interministerial hostage crisis group, through countless twists, turns, dead-ends and frustrated hopes over the last eight months: "an awful experience," he lamented. Kyrle's main substantive point was that, in the GOA's analysis, virtually the entire Sahel region of north Africa has become a lawless zone in

which Salafist al-Qaida groups can operate unhindered. These groups form a coherent, organized network, which divide the region into "emirates," all tied to a "headquarters" in Algeria. Kyrle said the GOA knew for a fact that key figures in this latest hostage episode were the same individuals involved in the 2003 kidnappings (para 3). This situation in North Africa, Kyrle argued passionately, posed a far greater security threat to Europe than "Somali pirates," and was severely underestimated by most members of the European Union. Finally, Kyrle gave the Ambassador a copy of a newspaper article from the "Courier International," which he said paints a very accurate picture of the relationship between al-Qaeda and Toureg tribes in the region (copy sent to EUR/CE/Saint-Andre).

GIRARD-DICARLO